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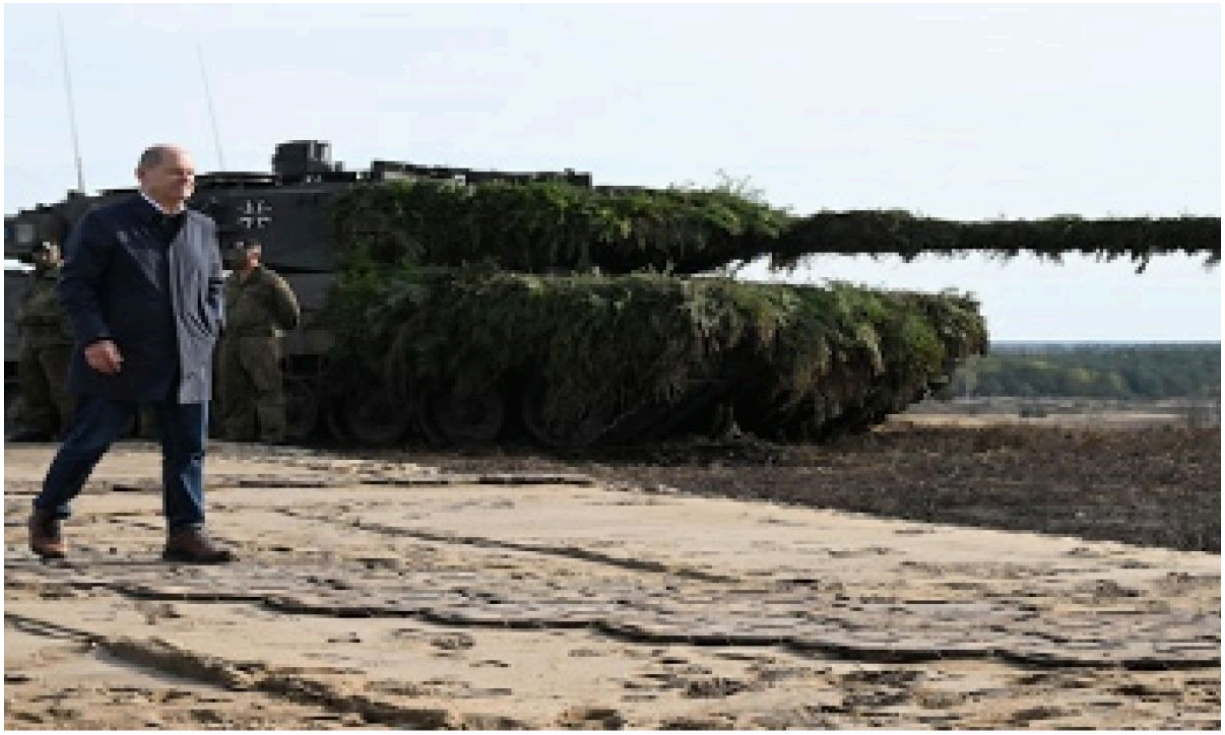
Independent Commentary on a Fractured World



Wonder weapons, weapons systems and gibberish

For almost a year, NATO - led by the USA - has been supporting Ukraine with huge deliveries of weapons in order to change the course of the conflict with Russia. The discussion about which weapons and how many of them are needed to change the course of the war is taking on grotesque features. Pseudo experts in the media and politics tell unbelievable stories - the nonsense seems to know no boundaries and now the West is supplying battle tanks - what good will that do?

Peter Hanseler

Thu 26 Jan 2023

Never in my life have I met so many "experts" in one pile. A good friend of mine, a senior officer in the Swiss Army, joked in March that the Covid experts had put away their doctor's coat and stethoscope and changed directly into the general staff uniform - experts who adapt to the respective facts like chameleons and look for a new field to establish their profile.

Furthermore, old, cold warriors are brought out of the woodwork, who are so happy to be in the limelight once again and thank God on their knees that they were not left where they actually belong: In their allotments, where they could do less harm.

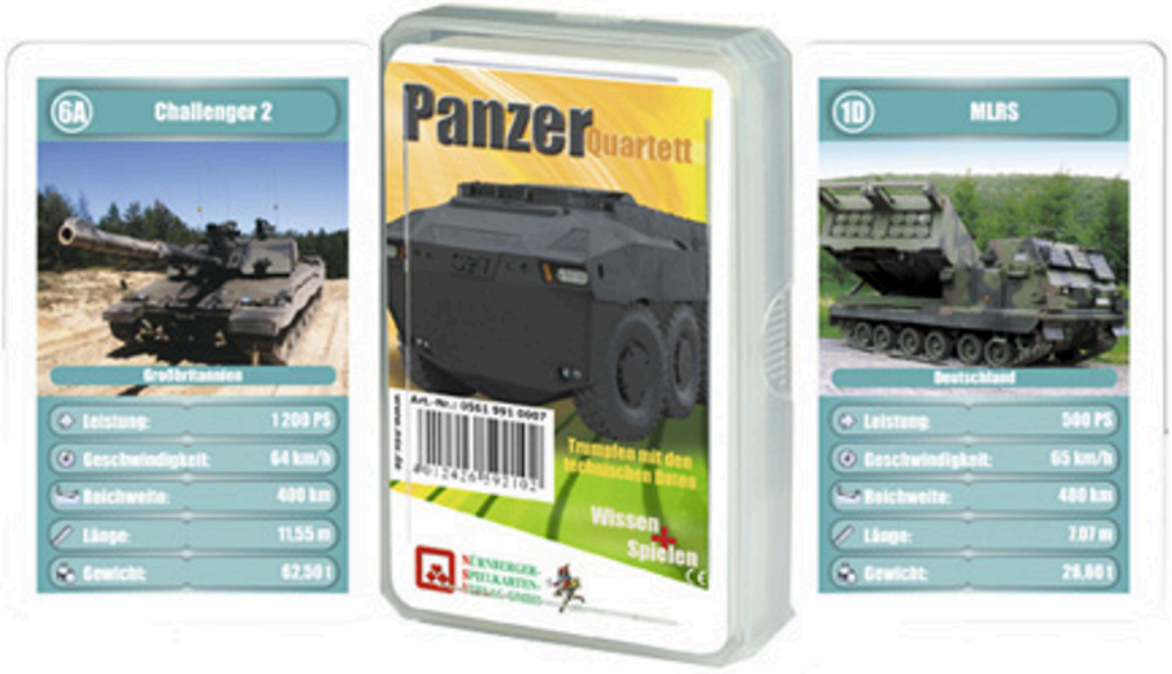
Introduction

I still remember playing quartet with my friends as a primary school pupil to find out who had the coolest car - in the fantasy land of quartet.

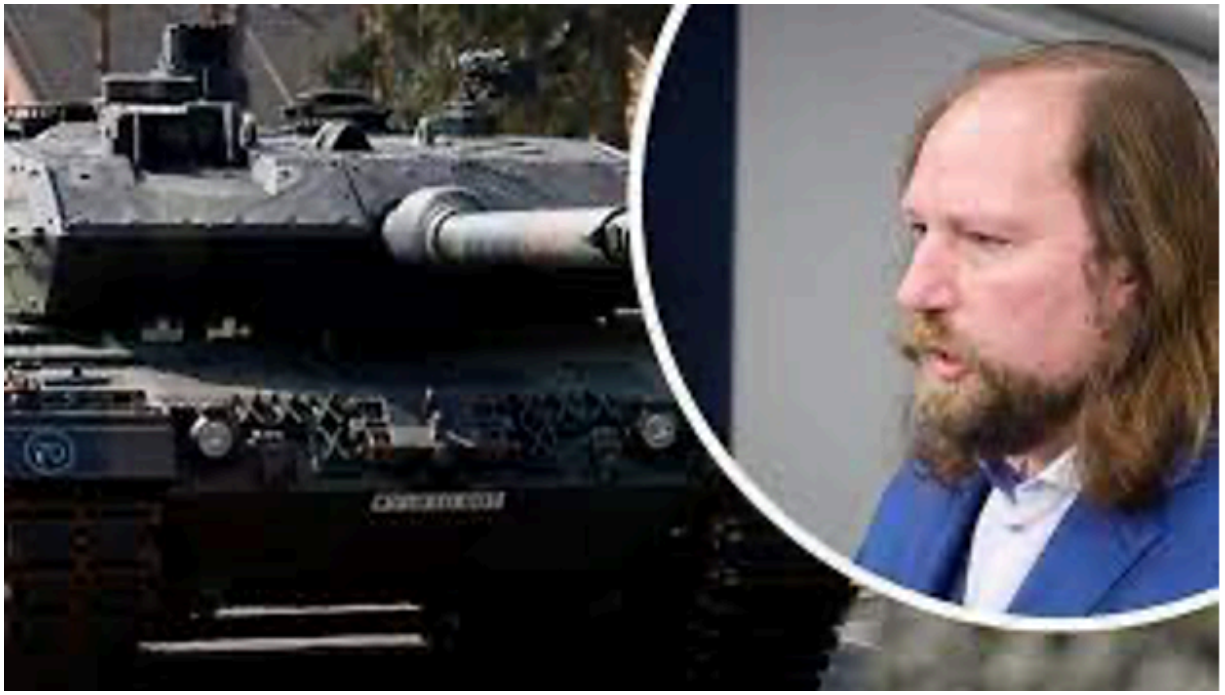
That was fun, and if you couldn't show the shortest acceleration from 0 to 100 kilometers, you tried the top speed, weight or price.

"This is the level at which discussions are being held today in Europe - and in Switzerland - which can have geopolitical consequences - not by children, but at their level."

These quartets were available for all topics that interested boys. Airplanes, cars, tanks, rockets - a wonderful pastime for children in times before computers and smartphones.



The Green politician Dr. Anton Hofreiter earned his doctorate with a thesis on the South American plant genus Bomarea and had no other professional experience worth mentioning. He reinvented himself, however, by mutating into a weapons expert without a second thought after he failed to get a ministerial post in the traffic light coalition government.



Dr. Anton Hofreiter, specialist for South American plant species, mutated into a weapons expert

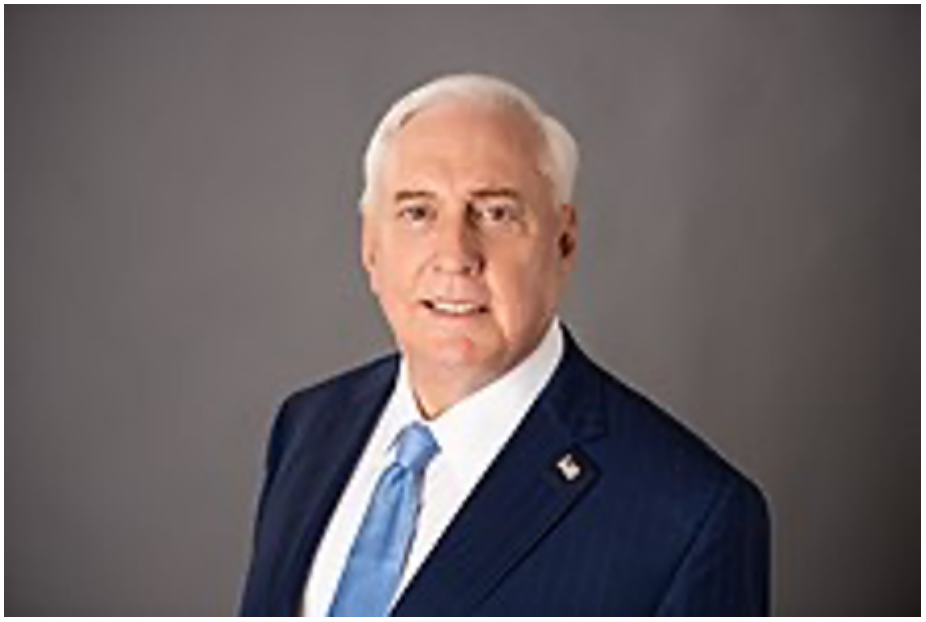
Arms deliveries to Ukraine so far without effect on the course of the war

Since the beginning of the war, mainly anti-tank weapons, drones and artillery systems have been delivered after Ukraine lost almost its entire arsenal in the first months of the war.

If you are interested, you can find extremely detailed papers on the Internet about the delivered systems and also very specific and good justifications why the systems did not bring a turnaround. I will limit myself here to commenting on the outcome.

Although Western politicians and media report huge successes of the Ukrainian army with these Western weapon systems, a look at the map shows that Russia still holds over 20% of Ukraine. The two major Ukrainian "offensives" in Kharkov and Kherson turned out to be tactical retreats by the Russians, which were celebrated by the West as great victories, omitting the fact that these "offensives" caused the Ukrainians mainly large losses of soldiers.

Casualty figures are difficult to quantify, but it appears that the Ukrainians suffered eight to ten times more losses than the Russians. At least, this figure was given by Douglas Macgregor a few days ago. Since this conflict has been very artillery-heavy so far, the figure given by Colonel Macgregor makes sense in light of the fact that the Russian army is capable of firing eight to ten times more artillery shells.



Douglas Macgregor, retired colonel of the U.S. Army
Bild: Wikipedia

Colonel Macgregor is now retired and served 30 years in the American military. It was he who commanded the Americans in the Battle of 73 Easting in Iraq. Colonel Macgregor, whose reports I have followed since the beginning of the war, is one of the most reliable commentators in the current conflict.

Consequently, that the Russian Army is virtually finished is not true. Regarding the Western wonder weapons delivered so far, one can thus reliably say that Ukraine has in no way managed to change the course of the war with these arms.

On the battlefield, the Russians are currently on the offensive. They are in the process of capturing Bakhmut and for the last few days have been active in Saparoshe. The big Russian offensive is delayed because the Russians are waiting for the complete freezing of the Black Earth and are using this time to integrate the troops mobilized in the fall. It would be fatal to interpret this waiting and preparation time as a weakness of the Russians.

Will tank deliveries turn things around?

I have been reading reports about wars and warfare for decades, especially about the last World War, and my main interest has always been in the conflict between Germany and the Soviet Union between 1941 and 1945. In addition to strategy and tactics, a great many new weapons systems were developed and tested during this conflict. Some systems looked great on paper, others not so much.

At some point, one finds out that the specifications on paper are only a small piece of the mosaic of the overall picture, which ultimately determines whether a weapon system is successful or not in the real world.

Since the entire West is currently talking about tank deliveries to Ukraine, I will try to discuss in this essay that a whole set of conditions must be met for a weapon system - in this case tanks - to be successfully deployed.

In doing so, I will mention examples from civilian life and from history to show that many aspects such as tactics, training, maintenance and logistics are sometimes even more important than the technical specifications.

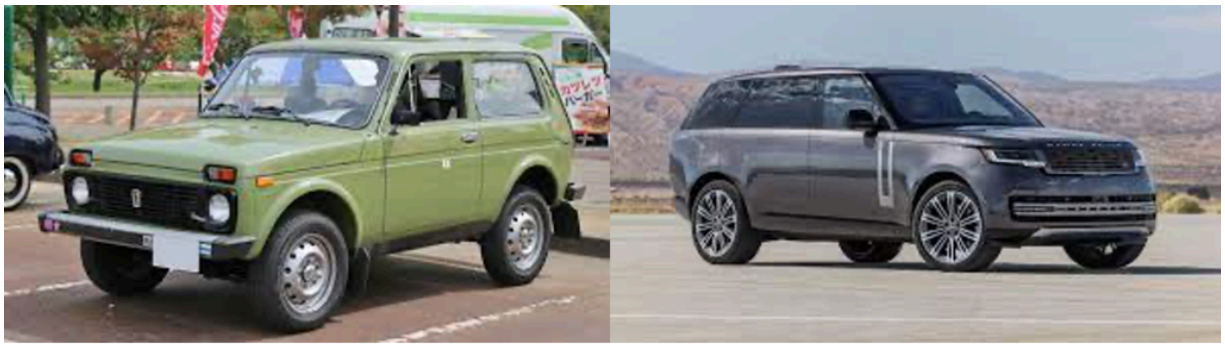
Which specifications are important?

Let's start with a civilian example: It's one of my boyhood dreams to go from Moscow to Vladivostok by car. What kind of car would you use if money was no issue? Would it be a great comfortable Range Rover, comfortable and luxurious

without end, or some other western luxury vehicle?

No: I would start this trip through Russia only with a Lada Niva. Why? - On a journey of 9'000 km everything can break down. If that happens, I would want to be able to repair something in a hamlet in the middle of nowhere.

A Lada Niva has primitive technology and you will always find someone who can repair this vehicle - without special tools. Have you ever popped the hood of a modern Western car and wondered who could repair it if it stopped working and there was no brand representation far and wide?



Lada Niva and Range Rover

Technically great specifications are therefore only valuable if, on the one hand, they are necessary to fulfill a task and, on the other hand, these properties can be maintained in the area of application.

Tactics and simplicity - a look back

Introduction

When talking about tanks, a look back to the 1941-1945 war in the Soviet Union is warranted for several reasons, as there have been no territorial wars with tanks between equal opponents since World War II.

The wars fought by the U.S. in Asia are not comparable, and in the last major land offensive by the Americans in Iraq in 1991, there were tank battles, but they were not a real challenge to the Americans because of American air superiority and their technical and tactical superiority. The most famous battle, which lasted only one day, was the above-mentioned Battle of 73 Easting under Colonel Macgregor.

Thus, it is worth taking a look back to the time when the tank was first used as an independent weapon.

The German Wehrmacht as the first major armored fighting force

It was the British who first built the tank as a weapon system, but during the First World War these monsters were only used as supporting tanks for the infantry.

It was the Germans Ernst Volckheim, Alfred von Vollard-Bockelberg and Heinz Guderian who are considered to be the inventors of the German tank weapon, with Heinz Guderian achieving the greatest fame through his book "Achtung Panzer", published in 1937, and his successes in the Second World War, first on the Western Front and then in Russia.

Explained in one sentence, the revolutionary change in tactics lay in transforming the tank from a weapon that served to support the infantry into a weapon of its own - a fast and powerful weapon that was at the forefront of an offensive.

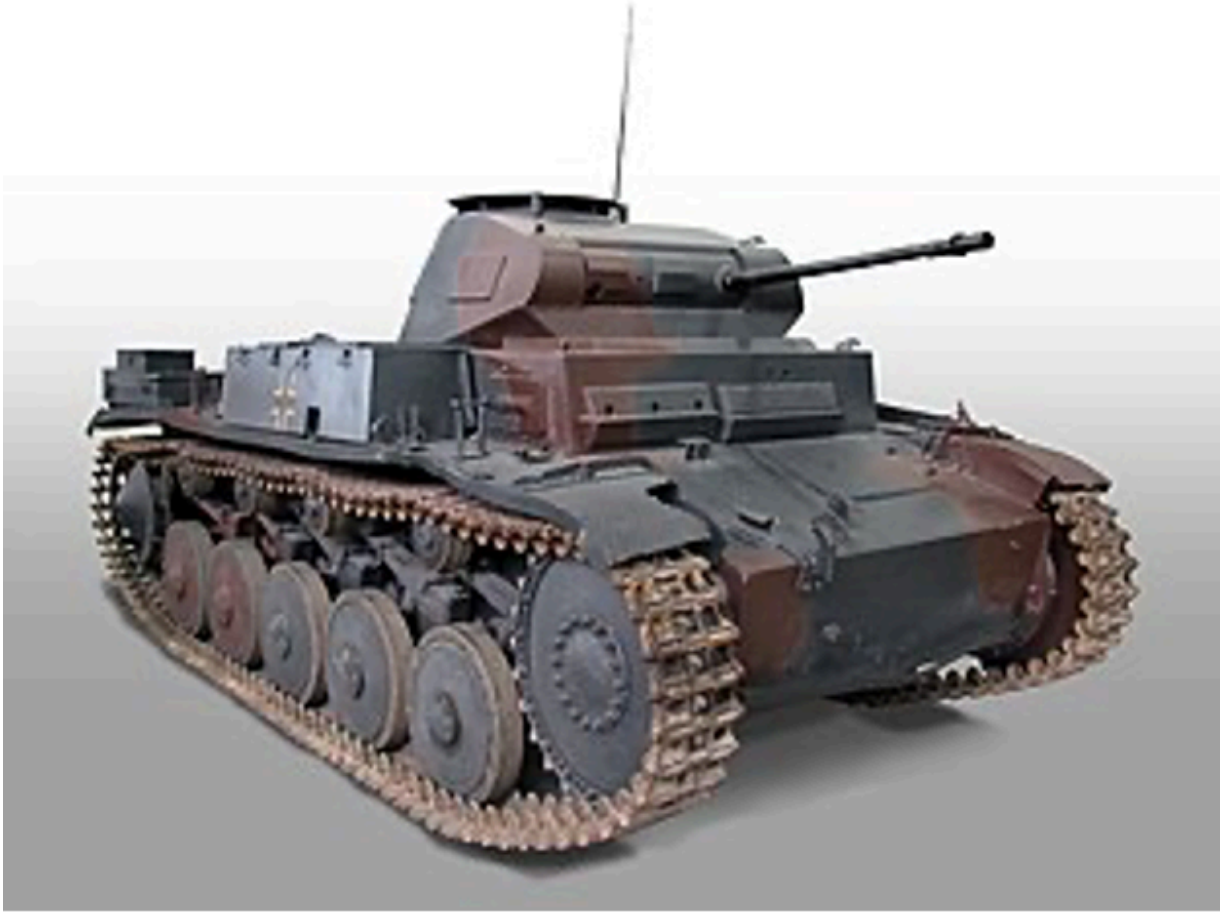
"As is often the case, the experts were wrong."

In 1939, there were already experts in war matters: these were of the opinion that France had the best army. As so often, the experts were wrong. In the early summer of 1940, the German Wehrmacht overran France and even the help of the British expeditionary force of 350,000 soldiers was powerless against the Germans. Within 6 weeks the best army in the world was defeated and the French had to surrender. The English expeditionary force fled from Dunkirk across the Channel to safety.

German victory through tactics, despite inferior tanks

Many now think that the German tanks were superior to the French and British tanks in this campaign - however, this is not the case.

The main armor of the German tank weapon in France consisted of so-called Panzerkampfwagen II, which was actually designed as a training tank, weighing only 9 tons, 40 km/h fast and armed with a 2cm cannon and a machine gun.



Panzerkampfwagen II – Panzer II
Picture: Wikipedia

The British and French tanks were vastly superior to the Germans - due to their specifications - but were used - in most cases - as infantry support tanks.

The German Wehrmacht thus achieved its greatest victory in World War II with superior tactics, despite clearly inferior materiel. On the one hand, the French were taken by surprise by the German breakthrough through the Ardennes - a plan of the brilliant General Friedrich von Manstein - and on the other hand, they were overwhelmed by the speed of the German tank advance.

This campaign by the Germans went down in history and cemented the nimbus of German blitzkrieg, with the Germans using the term "war of movement." The term "Blitzkrieg" was a word creation of a British journalist.

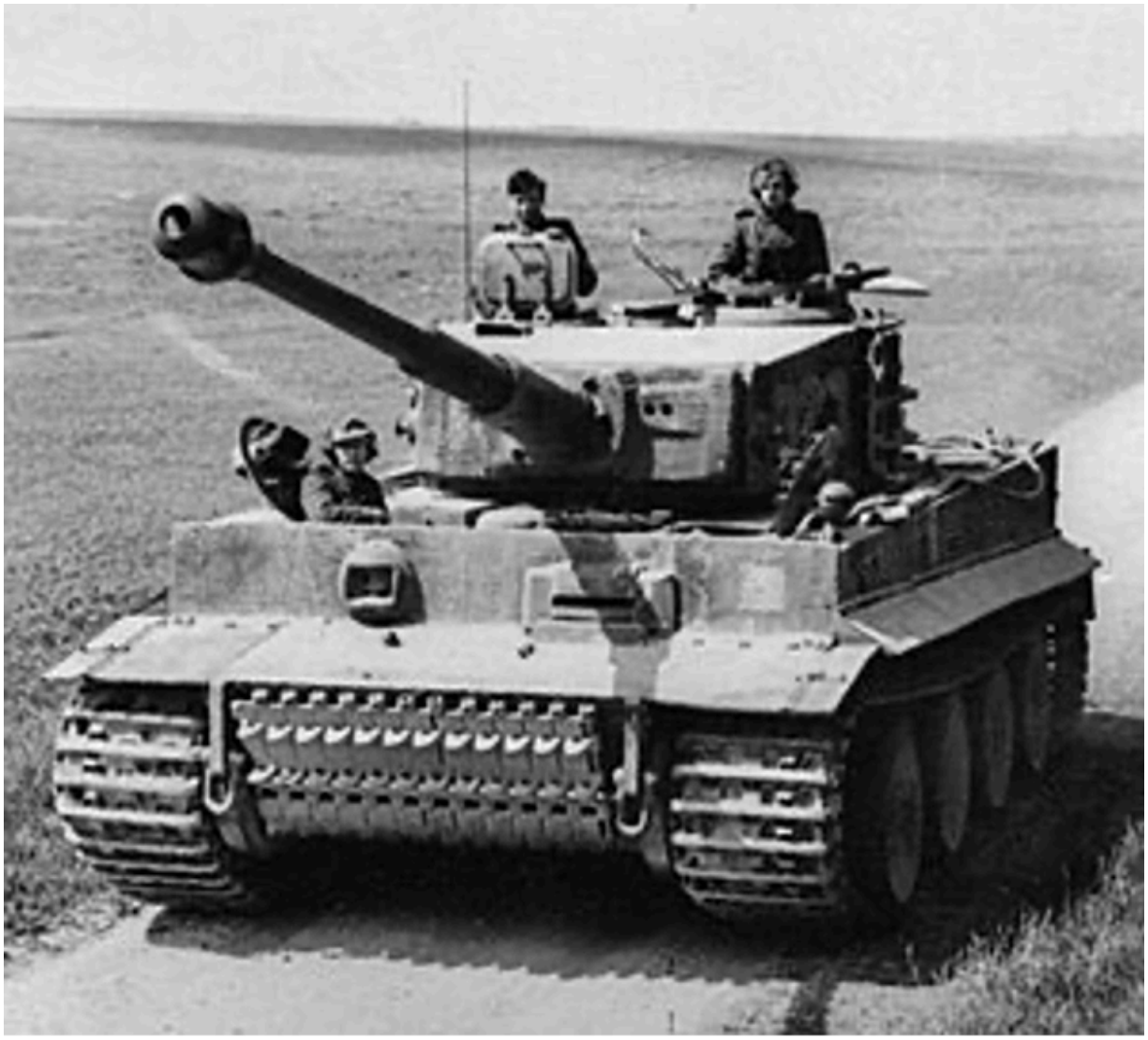
Thus, it is established that the specification of a weapon - in this case tanks - alone is not enough to succeed on the battlefield. If the tactics are right, an opponent can be defeated with superior material.

The best weapon against simple genius

The two most famous tanks on the Eastern Front were the German Tiger and the Russian T-34.

Panzerkampfwagen VI - Tiger

According to its specifications, the German Tiger - or Panzerkampfwagen VI - was the best tank of World War II.



Panzerkampfwagen VI – Tiger
Picture: Wikipedia

Its armor was unique and its armament, the legendary 88mm cannon, was superior to all opponents.

However, the Tiger had huge disadvantages: firstly, it was 6 times more expensive than the T-34, secondly, the Tiger was extremely complex in construction and was extremely heavy at 54 tons. The track suspension was extremely complex and

fragile and the Tiger was so wide that narrower tracks had to be fitted for rail transport, which were replaced on arrival - these alone weighed 1.3 tons.

Due to the high costs, the complex technology and the shortage of raw materials, which prevailed in Germany, only 1,300 of these wonder weapons were produced.

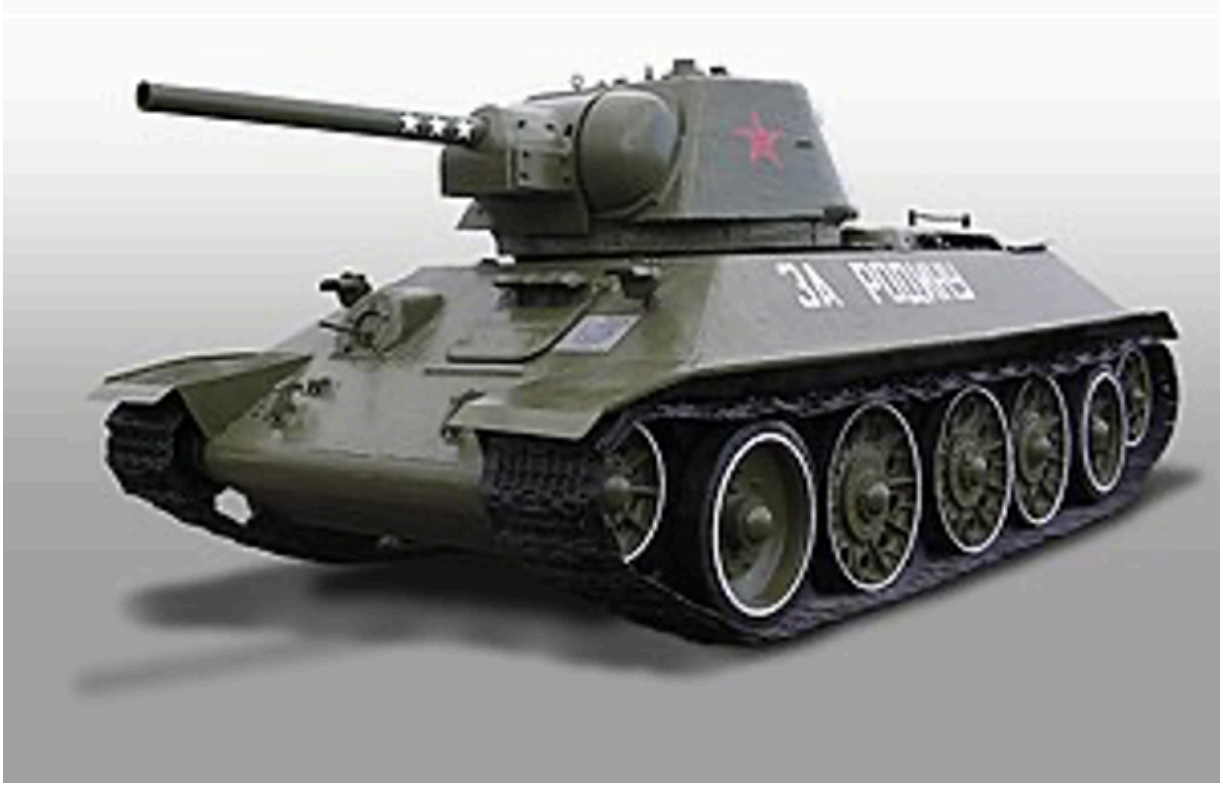
The Tiger was above all a great propaganda weapon, as it was considered invulnerable by its specifications and had the nimbus of destroying any opponent from a distance where the enemy could not even shoot yet.

Of course, there were absolute aces on this weapon; such as Michael Wittmann, who was in fact arguably the most successful tank commander of WWII. However, a war is not won by individuals, but by the masses.

Source: Youtube

T-34

The Russian T-34 was a typical Russian weapon system. It was ingenious, simple, easy to repair and had good armament.



T-34 (Model 1942) - Picture: Wikipedia

The ingenuity of the T-34 was, on the one hand, that the armor was sloped, and thus better protection was achieved with less thick armor. On the other hand, the T-34 was significantly lighter than the Tiger, faster and also had a greater range.

"Although on paper the Tiger was vastly superior to the T-34, the T-34 became the most successful tank of World War 2."

After many T-34s broke down due to minor defects at the beginning of the war, the military command decided that the tanker crews had to pick up their tank from the factory, taking technical courses that allowed for simple repairs on site. This greatly increased the reliability of the T-34.

Further, the Russians simplified the T-34 over the period of the war, so that a 1944 T-34 had 200 fewer parts than the 1941 models.

The Russians managed to produce 58,000 T-34s by the end of the war, and the T-34 and its successors were so successful that this weapon was in service in many countries until 1990.

Better, but not successful

Although the Tiger was vastly superior to the T-34 on paper, the T-34 became the most successful tank of WW2. Lada Niva sends its regards.

Leopard II (DE), Challenger 2 (GB) and M1 Abrams (USA)

Technology

The tanks under discussion, which are to be delivered to Ukraine, are all very modern and - handled correctly - probably good weapon systems.

However, the first caveat must be mentioned at the outset: Western tanks are not designed for the weather and terrain challenges in Ukraine. The Challenger 2 weighs 75 tons, while the Leopard II and Abrams both weigh about 65.

The Russian tanks weigh around 40 tons and have undercarriages and track widths that are designed for the terrain. Thus, the large weight differences not only affect mobility and fuel consumption, but will have a major impact on the ability to traverse difficult terrain.

Training and adaptation of infrastructure

To show how complex it is to integrate new tools into a system, I once again bring an example from civilian life.

The city of Zurich is justifiably proud of having one of the best, densest and most efficient streetcar systems in the world.

When a new streetcar model is introduced, the process takes years until the technical specifications are determined, the right manufacturer is found and the logistics, service, repair systems etc. are in place. Furthermore, the personnel must be trained for the new vehicles and the entire logistics for maintenance and service must be changed or adapted.

A tank is a much more complex vehicle than a streetcar and is not normally fired upon.

In Switzerland, it certainly takes 2 years until a tank unit is at the level to be able to exist in a battle. Besides the soldiers, officers are needed, who need experience to fulfill this task.

Model diversity multiplies the effort

The above-mentioned Western tanks differ among themselves to a very great extent. The M1 Abrams is not powered by a diesel engine, but by a turbine, which is extremely complex. It is impossible for the Ukrainian Army to maintain this unit itself.

The Challenger II, unlike the Leopard II and the M1 Abrams, has a rifled barrel, which requires completely different aiming and firing technology and training, in addition to different ammunition.

All three Western tanks require a loader, i.e. an additional man: the Soviet and Russian tanks have self-loaders, i.e. the loading process is automatic.

I have read a great many reports written by tank specialists and competent experts speak of years, not months, before a tank crew can efficiently operate these highly complex systems in combat.

Logistics - everything is different

The biggest problem of using Western weapons in Ukraine is logistics. These huge vehicles, which are used in combat, are subjected to gigantic loads, which very quickly leads to material fatigue and defects - this is normal.

"That Ukrainian soldiers can maintain these weapon systems themselves is pure utopia."

Comes to the fact that many real experts point out that mismanipulation and novice mistakes in operation can very quickly lead to large defects early.

In addition, the three tanks from the West mentioned above are very different from each other. There are constant changes and improvements with new parts, which were installed in each model.

Further a Leopard II of the same series differs, depending on whether it was manufactured for Germany or Poland. Thus the spare parts and the service manuals change, which are thousands of pages thick.

The fact that Ukrainian soldiers can maintain these weapon systems themselves is pure utopia, it requires years of training and last but not least there is the language barrier, because all manuals are not available in Ukrainian or Russian.

Service center in Poland

Like the other weapon systems already sent to the front, the tanks are not serviced in Ukraine, but in Poland.

The Russians have built their service infrastructures behind the front lines in order to have an efficient service structure.

The service installations in Poland are located 1,000 km from the front. Thus, for any repair or service, the weapons have to be transported over 2,000 km, always with the risk that these transports will be attacked by the Russians.

Result

We have seen that the level of discussion on arms deliveries in the West is almost infantile and that many of those experts who really understand the challenges of such a gigantic undertaking remain silent, do not speak out or are ignored.

Further, we have seen that the technical specifications of a weapon system have very little to do with its success in war.

Finally, we have found that these weapon systems require years of training to be used effectively and that the maintenance of these systems requires a separate infrastructure for each system equipped with a huge arsenal of spare parts and specialists.

Building up this infrastructure and the necessary training for it takes years. Therefore, it can be assumed that the new weapons deliveries will not have a major impact on the war effort.

However, the arms deliveries will have a major impact on the arms industry, which fills its pockets at the expense of the respective taxpayers.

ARTICLE TAGS:

Analysis Macgregor, Douglas Colonel Hofreiter, Anton Wittmann, Michael Germany Russia Ukraine Poland World War II Manstein, Erich von